

LONDON TIMES
20 May 1980

Former KGB agent who defected explains his role in spreading approved version of events

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Afghanistan invasion surprised some Soviet officials

Ilya Dzhirkvelov, a former KGB officer and Tass correspondent, defected to Britain last month. He has been interviewed exclusively by The Times. His disclosures about life in the KGB, Tass, how Soviet overseas officials are organized, Soviet attitudes to the Third World and specific policies in East Africa, will appear in a series of articles in The Times this week and next. In this first article he recounts how officials within the Soviet machine have reacted to the Afghan invasion and the Olympic boycott.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan surprised and dismayed many middle-ranking Soviet officials, some of whom privately welcomed President Carter's call for a boycott of the Olympic Games in the hope that it might make the Kremlin think again.

This is the view of Mr Dzhirkvelov, who recently held the post of information officer at the World Health Organization in Geneva. But he was also in charge of the Soviet propaganda effort in all the Geneva international organizations, and, after the invasion of Afghanistan, had the dual task of spreading the Soviet version of events among his Western colleagues, and relaying their reactions to Moscow.

In the version laid down by Moscow for dissemination abroad, the invasion was dictated by the Soviet desire for peace and by the need to defend the interests of socialism against foreign, mainly American, interference.

Approval of this line however was "hard to find" among Western officials in Geneva, and Mr Dzhirkvelov and his colleagues were not for the first time placed in the position of having to tell the Kremlin what it wanted to hear rather than the true state of affairs.

Their task was made doubly difficult by the fact that they themselves did not believe the official explanation they were required to impress on the West.

Not having been given warning in advance of the invasion, Soviet officials abroad were taken aback. "When we discussed Afghanistan among ourselves", Mr Dzhirkvelov told

The Times, "we simply could not understand why the leadership [in the Kremlin] had felt it necessary to take such a senseless and irrational step. We thought it was complete madness."

Mr Dzhirkvelov himself, who was for many years a Soviet intelligence expert on Iran and Turkey, can see no strategic or economic justification for the invasion.

"If it had been Iran we could have understood it—there would have been an economic motive, the securing of oil and gas supplies, as well as the political advantage of controlling Tehran. But why Afghanistan? We have enough mountains in the Soviet Union already."

The Russians, according to Mr Dzhirkvelov, are not equipped or prepared for mountain warfare, he believes the Soviet Government's action is all the more inexplicable in view of previous Soviet experience of long and bloody fighting against anti-Soviet nationalist rebels (basmachi) in central Asia during the early years of Soviet rule.

The basmachi, he argues, were as wild and as poorly armed as the mujahidin (combatants in a holy war) of Afghanistan, yet it took the entire might of the Red Army, fighting on its own ground, to crush them in a protracted struggle.

The Soviet troops now in Afghanistan, he maintains, are in a worse position, and are likely to become permanently bogged down in a war they may never win on foreign soil.

This is an especially bitter prospect for what Mr Dzhirkvelov calls "people of my generation"—Soviet men and women who were in their teens or early twenties in the Second World War, and are now well entrenched in Soviet society.

"How can you justify to Soviet mothers and fathers the deaths of young Russian lads in Afghanistan? If they were dying for some high political motive that would be another matter, but Afghanistan poses no threat to the Soviet state."

So why did the Kremlin do it? Mr Dzhirkvelov told The Times that is his view it was to show the world—and above all Washington—that they could get away with it. He and his colleagues

invasion and occupation of Afghanistan as "proof of the contempt of the Soviet leadership for the United States President and world opinion".

The Politburo—including President Brezhnev, who played an "important but not decisive role"—wanted to test Western reaction, to see how far they could go before the West took firm action in response, up to and including military action.

For this reason many Soviet officials of his age and rank were privately relieved when President Carter called for a boycott of the Olympic Games as a reprisal, since it might force the Soviet leadership to reconsider and revert to a "stable rather than emotional policy".

The breakdown of détente, they believed, was Russia's fault rather than America's, and struck at the heart of their hopes for a steady improvement in Soviet life through contact with the West.

The Kremlin had out of "self-regard" and over-confidence undermined at a stroke the carefully erected structure of stability between the United States and the Soviet Union, all for a purpose which brought "no conceivable gain whatever" to the Soviet Union politically, and even less to the Soviet people, whose economic plight Mr Dzhirkvelov describes as "catastrophic".

The Soviet man in the street, he says, regards the holding of the Olympic Games in Moscow as a grim joke in circumstances where even the most elementary foodstuffs are "dim memories".

Even in the 1960s, he claims, many privately opposed the idea of siting the Olympic Games in Moscow—and economic conditions were "better then than they are now".

Most Russians are, he says, apprehensive fearing that with the mammoth diversion of

scarce resources to foreign tourists and sportsmen there will be even less in the shops for Soviet consumers when the games are over and the visitors have all gone home.

The KGB, according to Mr Dzhirkvelov, is also apprehensive about the influx of visitors for security reasons. It would he says be "unrealistic" to expect the security organs to keep an eye on all foreigners individually during the games.

But as a result of discussions with the Moscow Olympic Committee a "quota" of visitors has been agreed, contrary to official Soviet assertions that visas would be issued to all those wishing to attend the games.

Those who are allowed in, Mr Dzhirkvelov reveals, will be strictly confined to certain pre-arranged routes, and "those who stray to right or left will not get far". Specially formed vigilante squads (druzhinki) will help the KGB to keep contact between ordinary Russians and foreign tourists to a minimum. "Soviet citizens", he notes with a smile, "have dealings with foreigners for only two reasons: either out of sheer necessity, or out of sheer foolishness."

In Mr Dzhirkvelov's view, the Soviet Government has always sought to avoid contact between Russians and the West, even during a period of détente, and their conduct at the Olympic Games is no exception.

Mr Dzhirkvelov expects to be called a "traitor and slanderer" for saying so; but, he is convinced many in Russia share his view that the Kremlin is so isolated from its own people, and receives so distorted a view of the outside world from its agents abroad, that it believes it can survive both the disapproval of world opinion and a deteriorating economic situation at home.

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